

Making text matter: Thoughts on the mission of Jubal's Lyre [July 1992]

1 Emphasizing textual meaning in musical settings of the Hebrew Bible usually performed principally for their musical and aesthetic value.

2 Finding Jewish meaning in Christian musical settings of the Hebrew Bible.

I take as a given that many Jews are involved, as participants and appreciators, in many worlds of music. For what follows here, it will be useful to distinguish between "involved as Jews" from "involved, but not as Jews." It will also be helpful to make a crude distinction between "simple" music (music that most people can sing or sing along with) and "serious" music (music that is more highly developed or complex, requiring special skill to compose or perform and concentrated attention to appreciate).

Music in the synagogue is, needless to say, music for Jews as Jews. Putting aside Biblical cantillation (not really music, but rather a mode of reciting), there are basically two kinds of synagogue music -- cantorial and congregational. Cantorial music (*hazzanut*) is very much a performer's art: how good and how highly developed it is depends almost entirely on the individual cantor's art and skills. Congregational music is, more or less by definition, simple music. When a congregation is vigorously involved in a service, what it sings may be meaningful, affecting, even beautiful, but it is not "serious" in the sense defined above.

And then there is choir music. Some good composers, especially in Israel since independence and in America in the 1950's, under the auspices of the Reform Movement, have written for synagogue choirs. It must be admitted, however, that most of the choir music one actually hears in synagogues is not very interesting; also that it is neither simple nor serious.

Outside the synagogue, types of music for Jews-as-Jews include: songs for Shabbat and holiday observance; Israeli, Ladino and Yiddish folk songs; and Israeli popular music (which is often not specifically "Jewish" in a religious sense.) Jews are also self-consciously Jews when they listen to concerts or recordings of music written by serious Jewish composers on Jewish liturgical texts, such as Bloch's "Sacred Service". Occasionally, too, a performance of Handel's "Israel in Egypt" is aimed at Jews, who then listen as if it had something to say to them as Jews.

The musical involvements of Jews-not-as-Jews are multifarious and very rich indeed. No one needs to be reminded, for example, that most of the composers who dominated American music in the '20's, '30's and '40's were Jewish -- Berlin, Kern, Gershwin, Arlen, et al. And great non-Jewish violinists have been almost as rare in this century as great non-Jewish psychoanalysts. Also, even without statistics, it seems clear that Jews are an important part of the support for serious music in this country and elsewhere.

The serious music heard in concerts and recordings naturally includes sacred music by Christian composers -- increasingly so as the early music "movement" pushes repertoire boundaries ever further back in time, to periods when religious contexts were more likely to produce great music than has been the case for the past couple of centuries. Now a great deal of this sacred music consists of settings of texts from the Hebrew Bible (i.e., from the so-called "Old Testament"), but I daresay that most Jews who listen to or perform this repertoire do not do so as Jews.

Why is this so? Simple lack of recognition is one important reason. At a performance of Bach's B Minor Mass, for example, most Jews will not recognize that the Sanctus is (as in every mass) a

setting of a passage from Isaiah ("*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh ...*") that is central to every Jewish prayer service. They will not recognize this 1) because they are unfamiliar with Jewish liturgy, and/or 2) because the words set by Bach are not the original Hebrew words, but a Latin translation.

Lack of recognition is not, however, the only reason or even the main one that Jews who love great sacred music do not listen to it as Jews. The fact is that most people who listen to serious vocal music of all kinds do not, on (partly unconscious) principle, pay close attention to texts. At the opera, for example, a longstanding ideal of appreciation and enjoyment has been to let the music wash over one, to let one's self be directly and immediately affected by the music and by the way it is being presented, vocally, orchestrally and visually. Studying the text beforehand has been commended (if not often practiced), but following along with written text during performance has been judged to be bad form, a barrier to one's own enjoyment and a nuisance to one's neighbor.

That this ideal did not always prevail can be inferred from the existence of librettos and from the very word "libretto" that we use. All languages use Italian words for "opera" and "libretto" because the Italians invented both things. In the heyday of Italian opera-composing, theatres were not kept so dark during performance as they are today, and Italians actually used librettos during performance, even though they were being sung to in their own language. They also did things like interrupting the music with hoots of applause and calling for repeats. In short, they were actively engaged, with performers, music and words. Today's reverentially silent audiences, waiting passively in the dark to be flooded by music, are a Wagnerian invention.

Nowadays, of course, things are changing again. Sub-titled opera on television and sur-titles in the opera house are perhaps encouraging audiences to more active engagement with what the music is meant to convey. But I shall not pursue this question further, for I have come rather far from the Hebrew Bible.

With respect to sacred music, a certain dissociation of music from text has been due also to still other deep, mostly unacknowledged, principles: it has been a necessary concomitant to the secularism and historicism of our age. Musicians and historians of music, not ecclesiastics, have been chiefly responsible for our ever-widening and deepening interest in the sacred music of past centuries. The 1829 revival of the St. Matthew Passion, for example, a distant precursor of the early music movement of recent decades, was the result of the collaboration of the composer Mendelssohn with the opera singer Eduard Devrient and the Berlin Singakademie. They were motivated, we presume, not by need to realize anew the text of the Passion, but by desire to demonstrate and experience anew the magnificent music which Bach had composed a hundred years before, and we are all certainly grateful for what they did.

When, however, in a concert hall, we hear, as I recently did, a brooding solo Bach cantata on a penitential text performed center-stage by a well-coiffed spotlight singer in suave black tie or shiny satin décolleté, who is duly applauded for skillfully negotiating his or her "atonement," we may wonder whether dissociation of music from text and occasion may not have gone too far. This wonderment need have no tinge of religious indignation; it can be a simple "humanist" feeling that something important is missing -- that the words seem not to have real meaning, that the occasion is somehow empty.

Music, especially music with words, has the power to connect us with our own deepest emotions and ideals and to show us where we are in our own history. In the post-Nazi and post-Stalinist period from which we are just beginning to emerge, we have been wary of this power; we have seen how music and the other arts can be used for evil as well as for good. When the Frenchmen at

Rick's cafe (in the movie "Casablanca") defy the Nazis by standing and singing the Marseillaise, we feel a thrill, but we can only smile indulgently and nostalgically -- it seems like another world from ours, and of course it is only a Hollywood wartime fiction.

But it was not make-believe when Verdi's "Va, pensiero" (the chorus of Hebrew slaves yearning for freedom in the opera "Nabucco") swept through Italy and became the electrifying theme-song of the successful movement for Italian liberation. And it is not make-believe when Jews throng every year to hear "Kol Nidre" The Yom Kippur chant does not guarantee a transformation of its hearers into saints, but it helps put them in touch with their deepest selves and renew their connection to the world.

It seems fair to characterize most of the concerts of serious music that we attend as not engaging us in this powerful way, as being focused on the quality of the music and its performers, rather than on the music's meaning for its audience (apart, of course, from aesthetic meaning, which I by no means wish to dismiss or disparage). There are important exceptions to this characterization, however. For instance, at performances of the Passions (of Bach and others) at Easter and of "Messiah" at Christmas, there is, I believe, a strong sense of text and occasion for many listeners.

There are also individual musicians and musical organizations that focus on text and occasion. Locally, there is Emmanuel Church, for example, which has taken Bach cantatas and put them back into the Christian liturgical calendar, using excellent singers and instrumentalists to perform each cantata on the Sunday or other holy day for which Bach wrote it. Emmanuel's music program serves the intersection of those who love Baroque music and those who love the yearly cycle of the Christian religion, and also helps enlarge that intersection in both directions.

Interestingly, the Emmanuel experiment, despite its church location and "traditional" religious content, is a product of our secular and historicist age. The Bach cantata cycle at Emmanuel is not in any simple way a restoration; it is a whole new thing. These cantatas are not part of Emmanuel's tradition. They were written two and a half centuries ago for the Lutheran Church, to German texts and in musical forms that are quite alien to the Anglican/Episcopal tradition to which Emmanuel belongs. Like most sacred music of the past, Bach's cantatas were orphans of musical and ecclesiastical history, rescued by musicians and musicologists for our secular libraries and concert halls. If Emmanuel Church has given them a religious home, it is a new home; this is not a restoration but a renewal, a new connection, a "making new."

For me, a formative experience of renewal took place some years ago, when I was a member of The Cantata Singers under John Harbison. Featured in the program we were preparing was Schütz's setting of Psalm 116, an extraordinary motet for five voices, composed with amazing responsiveness to its text. I was at the time quite new to Jewish liturgy (I certainly did not recognize psalms by their numbers), and so I was pleasantly surprised, when I began to learn the Schütz, to realize that the text was from the Hallel that is sung in synagogue on festivals and new moons. I had, in fact, only recently learned some lovely simple tunes for the beautiful Hebrew words of this psalm.

Harbison himself is very responsive to text and was happy to have me undertake a new translation of the psalm for the program notes. The method I devised gave me a great deal of satisfaction: I worked from two originals, Martin Luther's text, which Schütz had set, and the Masoretic Hebrew text used in synagogue. When the German words were ambiguous or where no clear English equivalent was to be followed, I looked to the Hebrew for help in choosing the English. I also tried, as nearly as possible, to make each of my English phrases line up word for word and line for

line with the Schütz so that the audience could understand not just the gist, but each word and line as it was being sung, a goal with which Harbison was in complete accord. His sensitivity as conductor to text and the translation work I had done together made me feel intimate with the psalm by the time we performed it, and I found that, despite the secular context, I was singing and listening as a Jew. It was as if this Schütz piece, disconnected for centuries from its religious and musical place of origin, was now available for renewal and reconnection, and could enliven and illuminate a piece of my tradition.

At the time of that Cantata Singers concert, I was going through something of a crisis as a Jewish singer of serious music. During the past few years, I had begun to serve as High Holiday cantor for Harvard Hillel, and I had also learned how to chant from the Torah scroll. These two new roles confirmed for me the importance to me of being at one with what I sing. I was now, therefore, finding it increasingly difficult to take singing jobs in churches, and this was a problem because churches provide most of the opportunities to sing the kind of serious music that I like and that is suited to my voice.

Even in secular situations like Cantata Singers I was having difficulties. It was, for example, with great reservations and with divided mind that I had participated in a performance of the musically and dramatically great but blood-curdlingly anti-Semitic "St. John Passion". Also, I had been learning to observe the Sabbath, so that Friday night concerts were now at odds with my sense of occasion.

My encounters with Schütz's Psalm 116 and other music helped me imagine a straight way out of my mid-life dark wood. I have formed JUBAL'S LYRE, with the hope of serving that intersection of people, including myself of course, who love serious vocal music and who also love (or want to learn to love) the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish calendar. There are many beautiful settings of Hebrew Bible texts from many Christian and Jewish worlds of the past that are waiting to be made meaningful again in our mouths and ears, waiting for reconnection and renewal. Our eclectic age offers us the opportunity to juxtapose this great music of the past with still living traditions and to use it to inspire new creativity.

In the 1620's, Salomon Rossi, a Jewish composer of instrumental music and Italian madrigals, a contemporary and string-playing colleague of Monteverdi, wrote and published (in Venice) thirty-three settings, for three to six voices, of psalms and other Jewish liturgical texts. Rossi's aim was to introduce some of the splendor of late Renaissance/early Baroque sacred music into the Synagogue; he was attempting, as Hugo Weisgall, the editor of a modern edition of Rossi's work, puts it, to show that the Synagogue could sustain what the Church had created. Rossi's settings of Hebrew texts range in quality from very good to wonderful and we value them to this day, but his attempt to influence the Synagogue was a failure. Weisgall says: "It would appear that Rossi undertook this work with only the slightest appreciation of the innate conservatism of the Jewish service. More serious perhaps was his profound misapprehension of what the place of music is in a service as thoroughly individualistic and egalitarian as traditional Jewish worship."

Rossi's work must of course be of great interest to those who share twofold love of serious vocal music and Jewish texts. Must Rossi's example be seen then as a red blinking light at our chosen intersection? Not at all, I say, and for several reasons. First, for better or for worse, there is no longer an impenetrably monolithic "Synagogue" now, not in any city; there is instead a very permeable mixture of synagogues, temples, community centers, campus Hillels, etc. Second, and certainly for the better, the animosity between church and synagogue is not what it was; in American organized religion, a spirit of ecumenism prevails. Third, as I have said, much of the

great sacred music of the past is now quite disconnected from its origin and is available to all. Fourth, the "mission" of Jubal's Lyre is not within the synagogue service itself; a Jubal's Lyre concert is, so to speak, a "para-religious" event, that takes place in a concert hall or (through recordings) at home or perhaps in a synagogue auditorium.

(On second thought, it might not be such a bad idea if those synagogue choirs were persuaded to sing something a little more interesting